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Article published Feb 18, 2008

Robot builders prep for competition

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MUNCIE -- The robots on display at the Morrison Mock Professional Building on Sunday didn't look like your stereotypical sci-fi robot, but they were amazing.

Six Indiana robotics-building teams -- two from Indianapolis, one from each Kokomo, Madison County, Huntington and Muncie -- were there to work the bugs out, and maybe show off a little one last time before shipping their machines to regional competition this week. The teams did not compete against each other at Sunday's event.

The teams are made up students in grades 8-12 who have been partnered with adult mentors from the engineering and science fields. Each team had six weeks to design and build a robot that can perform a pre-determined number of tasks.

Teams do not know from one year to the next exactly what the robots will be expected to do. So they have to create a new one every year; no renovating last year's model.

This year's robots had to remove a 40-inch air-filled ball from a six-foot-tall rack, maneuver it around a course, throw it over the rack and eventually put it back.

The Muncie team, known as the PhyXTGears, is made up of 18 students from several county and city schools and home-schoolers, too. They meet weekly throughout the year working on various projects.

"All robots must be shipped to regional competition locations on Tuesday," said Cheryl Leblanc, team coordinator. "The Muncie team is going to Purdue, where it placed fourth out of 42 teams last year."

The focus for the students is on science, math, engineering and technology, according to Leblanc. The program is an extra-curricular activity that is tied in with what they are doing in school, and it gives them a way to apply math, science and physics concepts in a real world situation.

"Just like the real world, they have deadlines, budget constraints and teamwork challenges," she said. "And they have fun doing it."

The program is under the umbrella of FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) which was founded in 1989 by Dean Kamen, the inventor of the Segue scooter, to promote science and technology to young people.

There are about 1,200 FIRST teams scattered throughout the world, 28 in Indiana. Each team has to secure its own funding. The local group is funded by grants and donations.

"It's real fun. You come here and you just get to build. Then you see what works and what doesn't. Then you solve the problems and fix things that don't work," said Trent Koch, a 15-year-old home-schooler on the Muncie team. "And you make friends, too."

Maya Leblanc, Cheryl's daughter, is a freshman at Burriss Laboratory Schools and is one of three girls on the team.

"It's a really great learning experience, and it's always fun to hang out with your friends and be productive at the same time," she said. "And it looks good on your resume," the future physician added.

Mike Koch (no relation to Trent), an engineer for Ontario Systems for 22 years, is one of the team's senior mentors.

"It's an excellent program," he said "You just don't find many programs like this where kids can get hands-on experience in problem solving and hands-on application.

"It's a great opportunity to work with young people," he added. "I spent all my life learning these things, so why not pass it on?"